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On *The Grammar of Messianism*, in Dialogue with N. T. Wright

Matthew V. Novenson
University of Edinburgh

I am grateful to the editors of *Expository Times* for the invitation to introduce my new book *The Grammar of Messianism: An Ancient Jewish Political Idiom and Its Users* and to respond to N. T. Wright's thoughtful review essay on it. First, a very brief précis of the argument of the book: *The Grammar of Messianism* is a reckoning with the history of research on Jewish messianism and a demonstration, via treatments of a number of notorious problems in the primary texts, of the merits of an alternative approach to those texts. Rather than take as my subject "the messianic idea" (defined in advance by me) and then go looking for evidence of it in the sources, I take as my subject the actual discourse of "anointed persons" ("messiahs") in antiquity and consult whatever sources engage in this discourse, the consequences for messianic idea hypotheses be damned. What emerges is a fascinating story of an ancient Jewish political idiom and its users, as I put it in the book's subtitle.

Chapter 1 "After the Messianic Idea" is a philosophical and meta-critical engagement with the long and distinguished history of big, important books on the messianic idea in Judaism. I show the various merits and demerits of these books and plead for a different, social-linguistic approach that has mostly gone untested. Chapter 2 "Oil and Power in Ancient Israel" explores the roots of ritual anointing in the ancient Near East and the persistence of the idiom of anointed rulers even after the ritual itself had fallen out of use. Chapter 3 "Messiahs Born and Made" demonstrates the tension built into the discourse of anointed rulers between charismatic endowment and dynastic succession. Chapter 4 "Messiahs Present and Absent" challenges the received wisdom that messianism is an ideological force that asserts itself, or not, at various times in Jewish history, arguing instead that the idiom of anointed rulers is one discourse among many for solving one social problem among many. Chapter 5 "The Quest for the First Messiah" argues, against some recent trends in Dead Sea Scrolls scholarship, that there is no such thing as the first messiah, no "patient zero" whose messianic career made possible all others after him. Chapter 6 "The Jewish Messiah–Christian Messiah Distinction" interrogates the familiar, ideologically loaded distinction between an outward, earthly, political Jewish messiah and an inward, heavenly, spiritual Christian messiah, showing how the ancient sources undermine that distinction almost everywhere. Chapter 7 "The Fate of Messiah Christology in Early Christianity" explores how early Christian writers of all theological persuasions made use of the idea of the Christness (i.e., anointedness) of Christ to myriad, sometimes contradictory ends. Chapter 8 "The Grammar of Messianism" argues that the textual interventions in chapters 2–7 demonstrate the heuristic value of my project and draws an illuminating analogy between the Jewish idiom of "anointing" and the Roman idiom of the fasces, "bundles of rods." In short, I conclude that we can very usefully think of ancient messiah texts as reuses of an archaic idiom to talk about matters of contemporary political concern to their respective Jewish and Christian authors. Thus far the book.

Now to N. T. Wright's review of it, which richly evidences the care with which he has read and understood my argument. He is well positioned to do so, since, within the guild of New Testament scholars, at least, Wright arguably has done more thorough work on messianism than almost anyone else now working. I do not disagree with him lightly, therefore. But I do disagree with him, at least at some of the points he highlights in his review. At other points we agree, and I find myself happy to think further along lines he has productively suggested here. But which points are which? Because Wright packs so much into his review essay, it will be simplest and clearest if I respond to his points *seriatim* and in the order in which he raises them.

First, Wright correctly perceives that my *bête noire* in the book is the metaphysical Idealism that has dominated modern research on messianism, and he perceptively points out (what I myself had not seen this clearly) that I assail it from two sides: the linguistic and the realist. From the former side I argue that messianism is not an idea but a grammar, while from the latter I argue that messianism is not an idea but a politics. This is just right. Wright voices a brief, undeveloped worry that these two alternatives to metaphysical Idealism might stand in conflict with one another, but in principle, and in the actual execution of my argument in the book, they do not.

Second, Wright asks for more nuance in my treatment of the Jewish messiah–Christian messiah distinction (chapter 6), in particular, for an account of how the natural–supernatural binary

often invoked by modern proponents of the distinction has its roots in Enlightenment Deism. I suspect that he is right about this, but he knows the social history of eighteenth-century philosophy better than I. Anyway, he is certainly right that—as I demonstrate in the final section of that chapter—both Jewish and Christian writers have valorized their respective, chosen sides of the natural–supernatural binary.

Third, regarding my subtitle “an ancient Jewish political idiom and its users,” Wright correctly notes both the importance and the precise sense of my chosen modifier “political.” In agreement with Wright, I certainly do not mean political *as opposed to* or *in exclusion of* religious. Indeed, if we needed one, this book could serve as an extended proof of the axiom that, in antiquity, the religious is political, and vice versa. The gods stand at the top of the pyramid of ancient social relations, so of course they beget, appoint, endorse, depose, sit in judgment on, or just *are* preeminent human rulers like messiahs.

Fourth, regarding Wright’s list of five “absent friends”—namely: the temple, the return of God to Mount Zion, the universal rule of the messiah, the early Christian redefinition of “messiah,” and the last battle—I would answer that some of them are not absent, and others of them are not friends. In fact, temple, universal rule, and eschatological battle feature quite prominently in the book: temple in chapter 2 “Oil and Power in Ancient Israel” and chapter 3 “Messiahs Born and Made”; universal rule in my discussions of Philo’s *On Rewards and Punishments*, the apostle Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, and Josephus; and eschatological battle in my discussions of the parousia of Jesus, Bar Kokhba, the mishnaic priest anointed for war, the talmudic messiah ben Joseph, and *Sefer Zerubbabel*. Now, I interpret some of these texts and figures differently from Wright, so perhaps he does not recognise them as friends, but they are very much present in the book. The theme of the return of God to Jerusalem is, I admit, largely absent from the book, but this is because I do not find it in most of the relevant primary texts. Wright (plausibly) finds it in some exilic-period prophetic oracles and then (less plausibly) takes it to be a *leitmotif* in the Second Temple period, but this latter move too easily ignores the commonplace belief that God was *resident in* the Second Temple on Mount Zion. So the theme of the return of God to Zion is Wright’s friend, but not mine. Finally, the notion of a Christian redefinition of messianism—as Wright puts it, “the way in which Jesus had redefined the idea of power and rule itself”—is, in my view, a false friend. It promises to organize the evidence neatly, but in fact it neither can nor wants to do so. As I argue in my chapter 6, Jewish messianism and Christian messianism are far closer to one another than either wants to admit. Jesus does not *redefine* messianism, because no ancient actor was in a position to do so. Every ancient actor who thinks messianism at all thinks it in his own way with the resources at hand.

This brings us, fifth, to Wright’s question of method in connection with his ostensibly absent friends. He writes, “I am not sure that [Novenson] avoids the opposite trap, which is that one might apparently shrink the subject [of messianism] to explicit uses of the term *Christos*, thereby screening out those passages where—and one has to be careful how this is said—the *idea* occurs, or might be thought to occur, even though the word may not.” Indeed, we must be so careful how this is said that, I propose, we ought not to say it at all. So I argue in the book. Hence I flatly deny that what Wright describes here is a methodological trap. On the contrary, it is an eminently sane procedure. Indeed, it is the only sane procedure if we want to understand the actual ancient discourse about anointed rulers. Now, if we want to understand, say, ancient Jewish ideas about eschatological redemption (which I think is closer to what Wright has in mind), then of course it would be foolish only to consider instances of a certain word. And in fact, the discourse of anointed rulers overlaps significantly with ancient Jewish ideas about eschatological redemption. But the former is not identical with the latter, and the mistaken assumption that it is has yielded mountains of sloppy thinking in the secondary literature. My book certainly does not tell us everything we might wish to know about Jewish restoration eschatology, but it does give a better account of messiah discourse than any previous treatment known to me.

Sixth, Wright urges that, even if we must forsake metaphysical Idealism, we need not and should not forsake thinking of our sources in terms of implied stories and worldviews. As he puts it, “Just because we reject Idealism, that does not commit us to a fragmented atomism.” On this point, I can go some way toward agreement with Wright, though I suspect not quite as far as he would like. It is true that anti-Idealism does not entail atomism, and that many people (and peoples) cope with life by means of what we might call worldviews, and that such worldviews often include narrative

elements. So far, so good. Where I differ with Wright is at the point of his readiness to assign explanatory power, or even something approaching agency, to these (implicit, reconstructed) storied worldviews. At the risk of oversimplifying, I think that people tell stories; Wright thinks that stories tell people (tell them what to do, how to live, what their place is in the world, etc.). But as I show in *The Grammar of Messianism*, the Jewish scriptures functioned for ancient Jewish and Christian authors not so much as one grand script but as a pool of linguistic (including, yes, narrative) resources. In the case of messianism, scripture gave ancient authors options: king or priest, soldier or exorcist, bandit or scholar, high-born or low-born, northerner or southerner, ascetic or *bon vivant*, human or angel, and so on and on. If we theorize worldview in such a way as to allow for all of this, then I have no objection to the term.

Seventh and finally, in his *peroratio* Wright makes a provocative point about messianism and the comparative study of religion. He cites, with disapproval of their “secularist agenda,” Burton Mack and Jonathan Z. Smith on the problem of claims to religious uniqueness. (I had engaged with Mack and Smith in chapter 1 of the book, answering Mack’s argument that the category “messiah” does not admit of analysis at all.) Imagining an ancient person declaring that, say, Bar Kokhba is the messiah, Wright reasons that “in the first century such a claim was not about ‘comparative religion.’ It was a claim about *messianic eschatology*.” Now, as stated, this is true. From an emic perspective, obviously our hypothetical second-century Judean will not have been doing comparative study of religion. But that observation does not (or should not) foreclose other, etic perspectives that the modern scholar might have very good reasons to adopt. The fact that our anonymous second-century Judean was not doing comparative religious studies does not mean that we cannot do it. Indeed, if anything, it suggests that we probably should do it. But in saying this, I think that I am disagreeing with the drift of Wright’s final paragraph. In the same context, he writes, “It is part of the grammar of messianism, I think, that a messiah is not simply like a prophet, one among a sequence who might anyway be wrong.” Now, it is true that ancient claims of messiahship generally did have high stakes; they involved nailing one’s colours to the mast, as it were. But historically speaking, as my book amply bears out, there demonstrably was a long and distinguished parade of messiahs who turned out to be wrong (depending, of course, on one’s criteria for wrongness). Indeed, a great many ancient messiah texts are preoccupied precisely with explaining why, or litigating whether, a given messiah was wrong. So in this respect, historically speaking, messiahs are exactly like prophets. Here I think that, in his closing remarks, Wright slips into writing in the mode of a Christian theologian. There is nothing in principle wrong with this; indeed, there is plenty right about it. But it is a different discourse, different from Wright’s own discourse earlier in his essay, and different from my discourse throughout *The Grammar of Messianism*. If I am correct in perceiving this shift in Wright’s essay, then perhaps I am not actually disagreeing with his *peroratio* but rather am simply talking about something else. In any case, I am very grateful for such a learned and thoughtful review of my book, and I hope that my response here has helped to clarify some of the central issues.